
Integrating Utilitarian Ethics with Servant Leadership: Resolving the Ethical Conflict to Maximize Employee Well-being and Organizational Success

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Abstract

This research paper highlights Utilitarian ethics and servant leadership, both of which prioritize the greater good to promote employee well-being and organizational success. Both frameworks emphasize maximizing happiness, nurturing employee development, and considering stakeholder interests for long-term success. Servant leadership creates a caring environment, fostering trust and job satisfaction, and improving employee motivation and organizational outcomes. The paper adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology, providing an overview of Utilitarian Ethics and Servant Leadership and explaining their alignment. The paper will examine the relevant literature on both concepts in depth. Ultimately, the paper concludes and recommends that by integrating the principles of Servant Leadership with the Utilitarian ethical considerations of leaders, leaders can strive to create a more compassionate and equitable society while maximizing overall well-being and positive outcomes, balancing followers' welfare with the organizational need to maximize benefits and minimize harm to the majority.

Keywords: utilitarianism, servant leadership, ethics, employee well-being, organizational outcomes, long-term success, Lusail University, Qatar, integrating, resolving, success, ethical conflict.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Utilitarian ethics align with the principles of servant leadership regarding employee well-being and organizational outcomes by emphasizing the greatest good for the greatest number. Utilitarianism focuses on decisions that maximize overall happiness and welfare. In servant leadership, leaders prioritize employees' needs, nurturing their development and well-being. By considering employees' and stakeholders' interests, both ethical frameworks promote a holistic, long-term approach to organizational success. When leaders prioritize employee well-being, it fosters a positive work environment, employee satisfaction, and productivity, ultimately leading to improved organizational outcomes and sustainable success.

Servant leadership is highly significant for employee well-being and organizational outcomes. Servant leaders create a supportive and caring environment by prioritizing employees' needs and adopting a service mindset. This fosters trust, engagement, and job satisfaction among employees, thereby improving well-being. As a result, employees are more motivated, productive, and committed to the organization's goals. Servant leadership promotes positive organizational outcomes, such as enhanced job performance, increased organizational citizenship behavior, and improved leader-member relationships. Servant leadership contributes to a healthier and more effective work environment, benefiting employees and the organization.

Thus, to effectively address how utilitarian ethics align with the principles of servant leadership regarding employee well-being and organizational outcomes, this research paper will employ a descriptive-analytical methodology. Hence, the theoretical analysis will explain the concepts of utilitarian ethics and servant leadership and their potential alignment in promoting employee well-being and positive organizational outcomes. Finally, the paper will summarize the importance of aligning Utilitarian Ethics with Servant Leadership for employee well-being and organizational outcomes. Thus, the paper will conclude that by integrating the principles of Servant Leadership with the ethical considerations of Utilitarian Ethics, leaders can strive to create a more compassionate and equitable society while maximizing overall well-being and positive outcomes.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Utilitarian ethics and servant leadership are committed to employee well-being and organizational prosperity. Utilitarianism seeks happiness-maximizing decisions, while servant leadership nurtures employees. Both stress holistic, long-term approaches that consider employees and stakeholders. Servant leadership enhances employee well-being, prioritizing their needs and fostering trust, engagement, and job satisfaction. This increases motivation, productivity, and commitment, ultimately improving performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and leader-member relationships.

Accordingly, this research paper adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology to explore how utilitarian ethics align with servant leadership in promoting well-being and organizational success. This research paper will consider a descriptive-analytical qualitative method. Thus, it will review academic literature extensively and analyze the potential alignment of utilitarian ethics and servant leadership in enhancing employee well-being and positive organizational outcomes. Ultimately, the paper will highlight the importance of integrating these principles to create a compassionate and equitable society while maximizing overall well-being and positive outcomes.

1.3 Problem Statement

Utilitarianism focuses on decisions that maximize overall happiness and welfare. Servant leadership is of great significance for employee well-being and organizational outcomes. The essential problem this paper addresses is that if the Servant Leadership approach does not

integrate Utilitarian ethics, it creates a potential conflict between the leader's primary duty to individual followers and the consequences for the greatest number of people (the organization or society). This disintegration challenges the completeness and ethical efficacy of the leadership model, as it may lack mechanisms for navigating high-stakes decisions that affect the broader collective interest. This paper addresses this theoretical gap by proposing that Utilitarianism serves as the necessary 'calculus' for Servant Leadership. By integrating these frameworks, the leadership model moves beyond purely individualistic service to a structured approach capable of resolving the 'Servant's Dilemma'—where the duty to an individual follower must be balanced against the survival of the collective. Hence, this research paper seeks to identify and explore how the Servant Leadership approach integrates Utilitarian ethics to enhance employee well-being and maximize organizational outcomes.

1.4 Research Question

The turning point of the research problem is to distinguish and investigate the extent to which the Servant Leadership approach incorporates Utilitarian ethics to enhance employee well-being and optimize organizational outcomes. Hence, the research question is: How do utilitarian ethics align with the principles of servant leadership with respect to employee well-being and organizational outcomes?

This research question has a profound impact on the methodology. It guides the research by demanding a design capable of assessing the conceptual and practical overlap and consequences of these two frameworks. The complex nature of the question, which links a leadership style, an ethical theory, and valuable recommendations, necessitates a robust, potentially descriptive analytical methodology.

1.5 Research Objective

The paper aims to understand whether and how Utilitarian ethics and Servant Leadership can be harmonized to promote a positive work environment, employee satisfaction, and improved organizational outcomes. Hence, this paper will conclude with several practical recommendations for leaders to enhance their ability to demonstrate sound servant leadership characteristics, grounded in a utilitarian approach to improving organizational outcomes.

1.6 Methodology

This research paper will employ a descriptive-analytical methodology to examine how Utilitarian ethics align with the principles of Servant Leadership with respect to employee well-being and organizational outcomes. First, it will conduct an extensive literature review on utilitarian ethics and servant leadership. The theoretical analysis will then explain the concepts of utilitarian ethics and servant leadership and their potential alignment in promoting employee well-being and positive organizational outcomes. This paper relied on AI applications, such as Grammarly, Gemini, and ChatGPT, to enhance its writing style, spelling, and grammar, but did not generate any ideas or analysis.

1.7 Significance

This research paper is significant because it addresses a critical theoretical gap—the potential conflict between a servant leader's duty to individual followers and the need to achieve positive consequences for the greatest number (Utilitarian ethics). By adopting a descriptive-analytical methodology to explore the alignment of Servant Leadership and Utilitarian Ethics, the paper provides a valuable framework for ethical decision-making. Its core importance lies in demonstrating how leaders can strive to integrate these principles to create a more compassionate and equitable society, ultimately enhancing employee well-being and maximizing organizational outcomes.

Moreover, the primary contribution of this research is the development of an Integrated Ethical-Leadership Matrix. While existing literature often treats Servant Leadership (SL) as a deontological (duty-based) approach focused on individual followers, and Utilitarianism as a consequence-based approach that may sacrifice individuals for the collective good, this paper proposes a synthesis. It advances theory by:

1. Providing a Decision-Making Mechanism for High-Stakes Dilemmas. It resolves the "duty-to-one vs. duty-to-many" conflict inherent in pure Servant Leadership.
2. Mitigating the "Resource Curse" of Servant Leadership. It offers a pragmatic, utilitarian corrective to the risk that SL may overlook the importance of organizational survival during economic downturns.

Accordingly, the paper thus offers practical recommendations for leaders on how to balance followers' welfare with organizational objectives.

2. Academic Postulations

Servant Leadership involves leaders adopting a mindset of serving others, prioritizing others' needs over personal gain, and exhibiting behaviours that promote positive outcomes. On the other hand, Utilitarian Ethics assesses actions based on their potential to maximize positive outcomes and minimize pain for the majority, focusing on the overall consequences for all affected. Both concepts emphasize prioritizing the greater good and acting altruistically. While Servant Leadership fosters a supportive and caring environment, Utilitarian Ethics is commonly applied in organizations to inform cost-benefit analyses. Despite their strengths, both concepts face challenges, including potential negative consequences for individuals, the lack of a universal definition of Servant Leadership, and the need to address likely zero-sum games in Utilitarian Ethics.

2.1 Servant Leadership

Russell and Stone (2002) asserted that "Self-interest should not motivate servant leadership; rather, it should ascend to a higher plane of motivation that focuses on the needs of others" (p. 145). Hence, Servant Leadership is a leadership approach in which leaders adopt a mindset of serving others in their interactions with colleagues (Russell & Stone, 2002). This leadership style

goes beyond self-interest and prioritizes the needs of others over personal gain. Moreover, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) postulated that “servant leaders are leaders who put other people’s needs, aspirations, and interests above their own” (p. 57). Hence, the essence of Servant Leadership lies in its motivational aspect, which sets it apart from other leadership theories: the fundamental idea is that leaders should prioritize serving others before assuming a leadership role (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Furthermore, Northouse (2019) suggested that “Servant Leadership model consists of three key components: antecedent conditions, servant leader behaviors, and outcomes” (p. 366). The model comprises seven behaviors exhibited by servant leaders. In this context, Northouse (2019) suggested “conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically, empowering, and creating value for the community” (p. 366) as the seven behaviors that promote servant leadership. Therefore, embracing servant leadership is expected to yield positive individual, organizational, and societal outcomes, thereby improving overall well-being and effectiveness.

Additionally, Servant Leadership encourages leaders to prioritize their followers' welfare, share control, and support their growth, making caring for others the central focus of leadership. Also, unlike traditional leadership models, Servant Leadership suggests that leaders should not seek to dominate or control but rather share control and influence (Northouse, 2019). Moreover, numerous positive outcomes are associated with Servant Leadership, as in this concern, Yukl and Gardner (2020) stressed that “improved employee job performance, more organizational citizenship behavior, work engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in the manager, and more favorable leader-member exchange relationships” (p. 679).

However, despite its strengths, servant leadership also has some shortcomings. One notable concern is that prioritizing followers' welfare over financial performance can negatively affect organizations, especially during economic challenges (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Also, this leadership style lacks a universal definition or theoretical framework, as researchers have not yet reached consensus on a standardized understanding of the concept that encompasses a range of abilities, traits, and behaviors (Northouse, 2019).

Thus, Servant Leadership is applicable across various management levels and organizational types. Rooted in a philosophy of caring for others, it provides specific behaviors that individuals can adopt to become servant leaders. These behaviors are practical and applicable in various leadership contexts, making them easy to understand and adapt.

Therefore, organizations seeking to foster a servant leadership culture should prioritize selecting individuals who demonstrate an interest in and can build lasting relationships with followers to promote their followers' growth and potential effectively (Northouse, 2019). Thus, Russell and Stone (2002) defined a servant leader as “the leader who does choose a service role sets about providing the resources others need to achieve success” (p. 149).

2.2 Utilitarian Ethics

Utilitarian Ethics is a moral framework that assesses actions by their utility. It determines an effort's moral rightness or wrongness by considering whether it maximizes positive outcomes, minimizes pain, and increases pleasure for the majority. Hence, Utilitarian calculations consider seven factors: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity or remoteness, fecundity, purity, and extent. Therefore, the foundational idea of utilitarian ethics can be traced back to Bentham's theory, which focuses on maximizing utility and promoting public happiness (Tseng & Wang, 2021). Hence, Tseng and Wang (2021) believed that "Utilitarian ethics has been applied not only to social welfare economics but also to the most recent financial crises" (p. 4). Accordingly, Utilitarian Ethics evaluates actions based on utility, weighing their moral rightness by maximizing positive outcomes, minimizing pain, and increasing pleasure for the majority. Utilitarian calculations consider seven factors and trace back to Bentham's theory, promoting public happiness and being applied in various contexts, including financial crises.

Moreover, the Utilitarian philosophical perspective emphasizes the need for guidance or principles, particularly in public domains such as medicine, healthcare, social services, government, and politics, as decisions made from a utilitarian standpoint are expected to be reliable, rational, and reasonable. On the other hand, classical Utilitarianism defines happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, and aims to impartially calculate overall happiness (Häyry, 2021). Therefore, Utilitarian philosophers propose that the criterion for decision-making should be the population's average rather than the total happiness. Yet, Hayry (2021) postulated that "the response to this challenge has to be in the redefinition of the good" (p. 347). Thus, Utilitarian philosophy stresses the need for principled decision-making in public domains. Classical Utilitarianism seeks overall happiness, focusing on population averages, necessitating a redefined notion of the good.

Furthermore, Goldstein-Greenwood et al. (2020) affirmed that it is essential to note that labeling a judgment as 'utilitarian' pertains to the decision itself and not the motivation or psychology of the judge. Hence, Utilitarian decisions are influenced primarily by cognitive processes rather than affective ones, and those who make such decisions are perceived as competent, logical, and possessing leadership qualities (Goldstein-Greenwood et al., 2020). Hence, Goldstein-Greenwood et al. (2020) asserted, "Utilitarian dilemma decisions require the commission of a direct, unsavory harm, but they do minimize the net suffering in a given scenario" (p. 12). However, Shafer-Landau (2013) argued that there are common misconceptions about utilitarian ethics, and individuals often fail to understand opposing viewpoints due to prejudice or voluntary ignorance. This can lead to frequent misunderstandings of ethical doctrines, even among those who uphold high principles and philosophy (Shafer-Landau, 2013). Therefore, Shafer-Landau (2013) argued that "there is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it; but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better" (p. 420).

Utilitarian Ethics generally involves an impartial inclination to prioritize overall consequences for the greater good. The focus is on the intended outcomes of actions for all those affected, rather than on the identities or preferences of the individuals involved. Thus, Verkuyten et al. (2023) added that Utilitarian Ethics emphasizes collective achievements over specific agents or favored groups because, while individuals may not emotionally endorse the actions themselves or overlook the importance of avoiding harm to others, they may consider the perceived constructive intentions behind the actions when addressing social inequalities and injustices (Verkuyten et al., 2023). Therefore, Verkuyten et al. (2023) believed that “Utilitarianism is grounded in the assessment of consequences for everyone affected, which means that actions are judged on what they overall try to achieve rather than on who tries to achieve them, such as the group one likes or dislikes” (p. 3).

In this context, Utilitarianism is commonly applied in organizations, especially in the business sector, where decisions are based on a cost-benefit analysis. Hence, while maximizing benefits is desirable, it may result in some individuals facing significant losses while benefiting the community. This zero-sum game is sometimes necessary to prevent the overall organization's demise (Griffith, 2007). Nevertheless, Griffith (2007) suggested that “a minimum level of reward is acceptable for each member. No member of the community must be disadvantaged and suffer as a result of the proposed action. This perspective, if applied, will reduce the potential for zero-sum games to adversely affect some members” (p. 11). Thus, Utilitarianism is applied in organizations, especially in business, but may lead to some suffering for the common good. Therefore, organizations should aim to minimize harm to individuals to avoid zero-sum outcomes.

3. Discussion

The literature review demarcates two important ethical and leadership concepts, Servant Leadership and Utilitarian Ethics, highlighting their key features, applications, and challenges. Servant Leadership, for instance, is a philosophy rooted in leaders serving others rather than focusing on their own gain. Hence, Russell and Stone (2002) asserted that “Servant leadership takes place when leaders assume the position of servant in their relationships with fellow workers” (p. 145). Therefore, it emphasizes prioritizing followers' needs, promoting positive outcomes, and exhibiting specific behaviors associated with caring and support. Thus, self-interest should not be the motivation for servant leadership; instead, leaders should adopt a higher-order motivation centred on others' needs.

On the one hand, the essence of Servant Leadership lies in its motivational dimension, which sets it apart from traditional leadership theories. In this context, Yukl and Gardner (2020) said that “service to followers is the primary responsibility of leaders and the essence of ethical leadership” (p. 677). Thus, leaders are expected to prioritize their followers' needs, aspirations, and interests over their own, thereby fostering a caring and supportive environment. However, a significant concern is that prioritizing followers' welfare over financial performance may adversely affect organizations, particularly during economic downturns. Additionally, there is no

universal definition or theoretical framework for Servant Leadership, resulting in varied interpretations and implementations.

On the other hand, Utilitarian Ethics is a moral framework that assesses actions according to the principle of utility, aiming to maximize positive outcomes and minimize pain for the greatest number. It focuses on the overall consequences of actions for all those affected. Therefore, Verkuyten (2022) stressed that “Utilitarian morality implies an impartial, general tendency to focus on the consequences for the greater good by deliberating about benefits and costs” (p. 3). Thus, this approach is rooted in promoting public happiness, and its foundational concept can be traced back to Bentham's theory.

Utilitarianism is commonly applied in various domains, including business, where decisions are often based on cost-benefit analysis. While maximizing benefits is desirable, this approach may result in some individuals incurring significant losses for the greater good. Hence, organizations should ensure a minimum reward level for each member to prevent disadvantaged individuals from suffering as a result of the proposed actions (Griffith, 2007). Accordingly, some individuals may have misconceptions about the approach and fail to fully understand opposing viewpoints, leading to misunderstandings of ethical doctrines. Hence, determining a universal definition of ‘the good’ can be challenging, and Utilitarian decisions may require addressing zero-sum games to minimize harm to specific individuals.

To correlate, Servant Leadership and Utilitarian Ethics share common principles of prioritizing the greater good and acting altruistically. Both emphasize the importance of considering others' welfare and fostering positive outcomes. Servant Leadership focuses on leaders serving their followers, sharing control, and promoting growth. It fosters a caring and supportive environment within organizations. In contrast, Utilitarian Ethics assesses actions based on their overall consequences for all affected parties, often through cost-benefit analysis. However, both concepts face challenges. Servant Leadership may struggle to balance followers' welfare with organizational performance, while Utilitarian Ethics may require addressing the potential for harm to specific individuals. Additionally, Servant Leadership lacks a universal definition, and some may misunderstand Utilitarian Ethics.

A critical advancement of this research is the introduction of the 'Principle of Minimum Acceptable Reward' as a bridge between the two concepts. This principle addresses the main shortcoming of Servant Leadership—the risk of ignoring organizational financial health during downturns. Through a utilitarian lens, the servant leader can justify decisions that prioritize organizational survival while employing the 'affective' behaviors of servant leadership—such as emotional healing and empowerment—to protect the dignity of those affected. This synthesis resolves the conflict between a leader's primary duty to an individual and the broader organization's consequences.

Accordingly, Servant Leadership and Utilitarian Ethics are ethical leadership approaches that emphasize the greater good and altruism. They provide valuable frameworks for decision-making but also require careful consideration of their practical challenges and limitations.

4. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

4.1 Summary

The literature review explores two significant ethical and leadership concepts: Servant Leadership and Utilitarian Ethics. Servant Leadership emphasizes leaders prioritizing others' needs over personal gain and promoting positive outcomes. However, challenges include balancing followers' welfare with organizational performance and the absence of a universal definition. In contrast, Utilitarian Ethics assesses actions by maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing pain for the majority, and it is commonly applied across various domains. Challenges involve addressing potential harm to specific individuals and misconceptions about the approach. Both concepts share principles of prioritizing the greater good and fostering positive outcomes, making them valuable frameworks for decision-making despite their challenges and limitations.

4.2 Conclusion

Servant Leadership and Utilitarian Ethics share the principles of prioritizing the greater good, acting altruistically, and making decisions that consider others' well-being. By integrating the principles of Servant Leadership with the ethical considerations of Utilitarian Ethics, leaders can strive to create a more compassionate and equitable society while maximizing overall well-being and positive outcomes. Both concepts offer valuable perspectives on ethical leadership, fostering a culture of care, and making decisions that benefit the majority while upholding moral principles.

Thus, by incorporating the following recommendations, leaders can navigate the complexities of ethical leadership, balancing followers' welfare with organizational objectives and promoting the greater good while upholding moral principles.

Ultimately, this paper shifts the theoretical discourse from viewing Servant Leadership and Utilitarianism as conflicting ideologies to viewing them as complementary tools for holistic governance. This integration provides a more robust, academically grounded model for ethical leadership in high-stakes professional environments.

4.3 Recommendations

First, embrace the philosophy of Servant Leadership, in which leaders prioritize their followers' needs over personal gain. This approach fosters a caring and supportive environment within organizations. Second, leaders should adopt a servant role in their relationships with colleagues, shifting from self-interest toward service to others. Third, while emphasizing followers' welfare is crucial in Servant Leadership, it is essential to strike a balance with organizational

performance, especially during economic challenges. Fourth, leaders should familiarize themselves with Utilitarian Ethics, a moral framework that evaluates actions by maximizing overall good and minimizing harm to the greatest number. Fifth, in Utilitarian decision-making, particularly in organizations, consider implementing a minimum reward level for each member to prevent disadvantaged individuals from suffering due to proposed actions. Sixth, be aware that misconceptions about Utilitarian Ethics can lead to misunderstandings of ethical principles. Therefore, it promotes a better understanding of opposing viewpoints and ethical doctrines, thereby enabling informed decision-making.

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